

This is a book about what matters in the church, not about what is trendy, weighty, or popular. *Preaching the Cross* is a book about what endures, not what is momentarily successful. It is about what God intends for the church—that we preach his Word with its center in the person and work of Christ—and it is about what the church needs most to hear. These essays are written with wisdom, winsomeness, practicality, and biblical fidelity.

—DAVID F. WELLS, Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor
of Historical and Systematic Theology,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

This book on preaching the cross is written by the best of men who know the grace of the crucified Christ and serve in the power of his resurrection. It is a call for other ministers of the gospel to faithfully proclaim the message of the cross and the empty tomb. It is also an invitation to share in the fellowship of godly pastors who stand together for Jesus in a world that needs the gospel.

—PHILIP G. RYKEN, Senior Minister,
Tenth Presbyterian Church

TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL

PREACHING THE CROSS



**Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan III,
R. Albert Mohler Jr., C. J. Mahaney**

Contributions by John MacArthur, John Piper, R. C. Sproul

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Preaching the Cross

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INTRODUCTION



Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”¹ —A. W. Tozer

Dear Brothers,

*We welcome you. We have come together for the gospel,
which is the desire and passion for our lives and ministries.
We pray that your life’s passion and calling are the gospel
of Jesus Christ.*

So began our letter of welcome to the pastors attending the 2006 Together for the Gospel conference. One of the unusual features of the conference was the public conversations between Ligon, C. J., Al, and me (Mark). We conversed onstage, not because our comments are necessarily profound but because the fellowship between us is so warm. Then and now we want to demonstrate to you, our fellow pastors, that we care about our individual ministries only as far as they are a reflection of our caring about the

¹ Quoted by R. Kent Hughes in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 151. [Cited from A. W. Tozer’s *Pursuit of God*, 97.]

gospel. When we have the gospel in common, we have all that's essential for time and eternity (though still maybe not enough to join each other's churches! But that's another conversation, and maybe one we'll have in front of you some day.).

The four of us richly benefit from our interactions with one another. I am still trying to learn graciousness at the feet of that most gracious of men, Lig Duncan, and I know that Lig would say that he has been encouraged and instructed in everything from complementarianism to humility by C. J. Mahaney. I know also that C. J. sees Al Mohler as about the most heroic man he's ever met, and I think Al likes the way that I try to encourage others to befriend his scary self! I could go on, but you get the idea.

Additionally, the four of us have learned much over the years from the special men who spoke along with us at the conference and whose talks appear in the chapters following. R. C. Sproul has had an influence for a generation now that is unusually wide and deep in upholding the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. John Piper has been used by God to bring freshness to our understanding of God's sovereign goodness. And John MacArthur has been providing a model of faithfulness in biblical preaching since before most of us were even converted.

Every once in a while God uses a conference such as this in a strategic way to put new heart in his under-shepherds and so bless his people. We prayed that this would be such a conference, that through it God would tune our hearts and minds to him as we thought and talked together about preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We prayed that those who attended would know great blessing from it.

Now, long after the conclusion of that event, we want to give thanks to God for the encouragement many did indeed experience as a result of that gathering and for the instruction given and friendships made there. In introducing this volume, which is comprised of the conference addresses, I want to say a little

bit more about the history of the conference, the “heroes” we invited to join us, and the hopes that we had for the conference attendees—and for you as you prepare to read these messages.

A Conference with History

The conference is rooted in the unusual friendship that the four of us enjoy. We’re all about the same age (except for C. J., who is old enough to be our dad, but he has exceptional athletic ability!). I met these extraordinary men one by one. Al Mohler and I became friends more than twenty years ago when we were students at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The depth and range of Al’s knowledge was apparent from our first conversation. I remember telling David Wells not long afterward that he would hear about this young friend of mine one day! The intensity with which Al lives was evidenced in the number of times he rang my phone after midnight, asking, “Mark, are you up?” (Given the hour, the question begged for a smart response, but I don’t think I ever gave one.)

In subsequent years, I moved away to England. On visits to various cathedrals I obtained two copies of accompanying literature—one set for me, another for Al. He was my most faithful correspondent and encouraged me throughout my Ph.D program, and he has continued to do so since I took up the pastorate in Washington DC, even as his own life has become so busy.

Great Britain is where Lig Duncan came into my story. One of his friends from Covenant Seminary, Randy, was doing his Ph.D at Cambridge while I was studying there as well, and my family often shared meals with Randy’s family. One day Randy asked me if I happened to know a friend of his, Lig, who had preached at their Presbyterian church on Sunday. He suggested we would get along well, so he got Lig on the phone, and we wound up talking for quite a while. I subsequently visited him several times up in Edinburgh, and he visited Connie and me down in Cambridge. Even

then Lig was remarkably informed about everything that has happened from the patristic era (his field of doctoral study) up through the day before yesterday—all before the days of the Internet!

Lig became a close friend as we talked and prayed together about so many things, not least of which were some large life decisions that we faced simultaneously. Lig returned to the United States where he met Al, who was speaking at an RTS faculty retreat. Their friendship too has since grown; Al and Lig have provided help and encouragement to each other over the years. Lig is unflagging in graciousness toward others—even Baptists!

And then there's C. J., whom Don Whitney advised me to meet when I moved to the DC area. I neglected to do so, but in God's providence Aaron Menikoff and I had plans to visit a church member living in a retirement home near Covenant Life Church where C. J. was pastor. Aaron wanted to stop at the church and get a copy of Josh Harris's book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Josh was associate pastor there at the time). I initially refused but then changed my mind and decided to try to find C. J. and introduce myself. But C. J. was in a meeting, so I simply left my card. He phoned me a few days later, and we had the first of what has become a series of enjoyable, edifying, challenging, intense lunches. C. J. has been a unique counselor to me since that first day, telling me what to do, with love, sensitivity, wisdom, and confidence. C. J. soon met Lig Duncan through their mutual involvement in the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. They got on warmly and have been a great encouragement to each other.

Sometime later I traveled to join C. J. at a New Attitude conference in Louisville. We met up with Al, and the three of us had a great time talking. We all commented on the fact that we missed having Ligon there, so we arranged to try to have him join us at our next meeting. And he did! This was the first of many such gatherings.

It was at one of those meetings that, during our typically long,

enjoyable, question-then-anecdote-then-straight-into-argument-and-then-into-passionate-agreement conversations, one of us (I think it was Al, but we all were making the same kind of noises) remarked on the edifying nature of our conversations, and we all expressed a desire for pastors to experience this same sort of fellowship. As we talked, we came up with the idea of holding a conference at which the four of us would speak and afterward sit around and talk about the talks in front of our audience. (We talk about the talks late at night anyway, whenever we find ourselves together at a conference, although we do it without the audience!) We weren't sure what kind of audience we would get for our event, but we knew that we'd enjoy it no matter who came; any benefit accruing to others would be a bonus.

We thought that interest in the conference might be generated in part because of our differences, which actually serve to highlight our agreements. Al and I might have a few disagreements, but few, if any, are substantial. However, Ligon is a Presbyterian (though he and Al are both accused from time to time in their respective circles of being advocates for the other's denomination). We thought it would be interesting to see how much the three of us, from somewhat different ecclesiologies, stand together on the gospel and the various challenges confronting it today, but throw C. J. into the mix and the conference would really become interesting! I could keep going, but you get the idea.

We were sold. Matt Schmucker of 9Marks led with quiet and relentless faithfulness in the organization and administration of the conference with remarkable help (an understatement!) from Paul Medler and the Sovereign Grace Ministries conference team.

As I said the first night of the conference, we came together for the gospel. We wanted to encourage pastors, who are subjected to many shifting winds of doctrine and practice. Of course, the four of us didn't agree on what to wear or what kind of pulpit to use, and we barely came to agreement on the music, since our

musical expression varies greatly. Some of us respond to sermons with applause while the others say *amen* (and even that we pronounce differently!). But we didn't come together to showcase our differences. We came together to highlight what we agree on—we came together for the gospel. My message lays out the nature of the calling of the true Christian minister, which is preaching God's Word. Lig Duncan's address is a masterful summation of how Christian ministers are to preach from the Old Testament. Al Mohler does a wonderful job of explaining how our preaching is to be culturally appropriate and penetratingly applied. And C. J.'s message is a reminder that the cross is to appear not just in our preaching but in our lives.

Our hopes were deeply blessed. Local ministers came, along with others from as far away as India and Australia. The attendees ranged from young seminary students to pastors who have shepherded a congregation for decades. They were Baptist and non-denominational, charismatic and Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist—pastors who tend to disagree on any number of matters. But we came together for the gospel.

A Conference with Heroes

But this volume has seven authors, not just four. We agreed that we would enlarge the conference—its enjoyment for us, its attraction and usefulness to others—if we could include some of our own preaching heroes. We quickly agreed on three we wanted to invite, and they graciously agreed to come.

John MacArthur came to share with us his experience of preaching the cross, which he has been doing almost as long as many of us have been alive. We thought his example of long faithfulness would encourage the young ministers attending, who are, no doubt, fearful from many stories of shipwrecked ministries that loom large because they've come to realize how easy it is to steer off course. We thought John's ministry would bring glory to

God and comfort to them. And it did. And I think it will to you too as you look at his story, which is recounted in the last chapter of this volume.

R. C. Sproul also agreed to come. We could think of no one who draws a clearer distinction on where the gospel stands or falls. For decades R. C. has articulated that salvation comes not from our cooperating with God but from God's righteousness being accounted to us. R. C. has been willing to do whatever faithfulness requires so that the message remains clear, plain, straight, understood, and biblically faithful. That's why we asked him to speak on justification. He did so in a way that was helpful to pastors whose preaching may have wandered away to a focus other than the cross of Christ. We think you'll be blessed by reading his words.

And then there is that current evangelical rock star, John Piper! What a gift John is to the church. While too many of us are saying a lot of things quickly and running on to the next, John stops and stands and stays and stares at God's Word. Sometimes he stares at something that seems so obvious, but he keeps staring until it begins to expand and fill the horizon of his sight. It becomes rich and detailed and luscious and intricate and full and demanding and hope-giving and life-affirming and sin-denying and sacrifice-requiring—and adjective-adding. John prays and thinks until a part of God's Word which seemed simple and obvious becomes fresh and powerful.

The fruits of his labors were evidenced at the conference as he exhorted us not simply to inform people what God says in his Word but to exult in it. Preaching the cross without exulting in the cross is to deny the cross. That and much more await your attention in his chapter.

A Conference of Hope

Finally, we prayed to God for ourselves, our ministries, and for you who would enjoy the fruit of this labor. We enjoyed the opportu-

nity to obey God's call by encouraging other ministers as we, too, were edified and encouraged. And now we have hopes and prayers for the readers of this volume. We desire you to preach the cross. Build your church by preaching the cross. Be encouraged and a source of encouragement by preaching the cross. Build friendships with ministers who preach the cross and with Christians who love God and are giving their whole lives to him. We pray that our cooperation will remind you of the largeness of God's plan, a plan that extends beyond our particular congregations or denominations. We hope that the Together for the Gospel Affirmation and Denials 2006 (appearing in this volume as Appendix) will be instructive and useful.

Learn from our Sovereign Grace guys to have confidence with humility. Learn from our Presbyterian friends to read books and conduct charitable, careful conversations. Learn from our non-denominational friends to center our unity in Christ and his gospel even more than in our traditions. And learn from us Baptists about . . . something. Since I am a Baptist, it wouldn't be seemly for me to finish *that* sentence!

Above all, as you read this book learn again to preach the cross. That is what a minister of the Word of God is called to do, from the New Testament and the Old, and in a way that is understandable and penetrating, faithful to the truth of justification by faith alone, visibly and verbally exulting in God's grace, reflected in our lives, and shown over the years and decades of ministry that God may give you. Preach the cross. That's why we came together. That's why we wrote this book. We pray that is what you're encouraged to do by reading it.

—Mark Dever, on behalf of Ligon Duncan,
C. J. Mahaney, and Albert Mohler

CHAPTER 1

A REAL MINISTER: 1 CORINTHIANS 4

Mark E. Dever



Churches today must be recovered. They must once again put the Word of God at the center; and that happens most fundamentally through preaching.

The great Puritan pastor Richard Baxter said that “All churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise or fall, not in riches and worldly grandeur, but in knowledge, zeal and ability for their work.”¹ As I thought and prayed about the role of the pastor and the work of the ministry, my attention naturally turned to the situation at Corinth, where fake ministers were threatening to spoil the fruit of Paul’s ministry. This crisis called forth from Paul some of his most pointed words and sustained meditations on the role of the pastor. In this chapter we will consider particularly chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians as we ponder what it means to be a real minister.

In 1 Corinthians 4 there is a striking contrast between the real ministers of Christ and the fake ones, the impostors. As we turn

¹Marcus Loane, *Makers of Puritan History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1961), 188.

to the passage, we find a pastor defining his role by means of three marks of a real minister.

The First Mark of a Real Minister Is a Cross-centered Message: 1 Corinthians 4:1-7

Paul writes, “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.” (1 Cor. 4:1).² “The secret things of God”—that’s what a real minister is all about. And that’s why, Paul says, these Corinthians shouldn’t divide over competing loyalties toward different ministers or preachers of the true gospel. If it is the gospel that has truly brought the congregation in Corinth together, then they will know unity rather than division among the various ministers of that same gospel.

Of course, they (the Corinthians) are not the ones appointed to be the final judges of God’s ministers. Undergirding this situation at Corinth is an important principle: It is God’s prerogative, and his alone, to judge ministers, because everything is done according to his purposes. Ministers of the gospel especially are stewards of God’s mysteries, his secret things—the gospel. A steward is someone who is not an owner but one who is entrusted with someone else’s property. So ministers must remember that the churches they lead are not theirs, regardless of how long they have been there. The entire church is the Lord’s church, and God has entrusted his servants with the message of the crucified Messiah.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that these servants, the preachers, would all be judged by whether they were faithful to their master—and their master wasn’t the Corinthian congregation, and it certainly wasn’t the worldly standards that seemed to control them. Look again at verse 1: “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things

²Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references in this chapter are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV).

of God.” Even the apostles were ministers, not masters! They were fundamentally servants, not of the Corinthians but of Christ. As Matthew Henry put it, “They had no authority to propagate their own fancies, but to spread Christian faith.”³ They were sent out to preach the gospel and so see churches created.

Why does the postal service exist? What do we pay mailmen to do? Do we pay them to write letters to us and put them in our mailboxes? No. We pay them to deliver faithfully the message of someone else. The mailman has been entrusted with other people’s messages to us. The same is true with ministers and their ministries. We are not to invent the message but to faithfully deliver God’s message to his people. That is our calling, which means that we are called as ministers only insofar as we present God’s message to his people. It is God who owns the church, and it is by his Word that he creates his people.

While attending a reception in Washington, I had a conversation with a Roman Catholic friend about a recently published book that we had both read. I asked him what he thought. “Oh, it was very good,” he said, “except that it was marred by the author’s repeating of that old Protestant error that the Bible created the church, when we all know,” my friend said with assurance, “that the church created the Bible.”

I was in a quandary. How should I respond? What should I say? But I decided that if he could be so openly dismissive, then I could be as contradictory as I wished. “That’s ridiculous,” I said, trying to sound as pleasant as I could. “God’s people have never created God’s Word! From the very beginning, God’s Word has created his people. We see this in Genesis 1, where God literally created all that is by his Word, including his people. We see it in Genesis 12, where God calls Abraham out of Ur by the Word of

³ *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. 6: Acts to Revelation* (rpt. McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 522.

his promise. We find it in Ezekiel 37, where God gives Ezekiel a vision to share with the Israelite exiles in Babylon about a great resurrection that will come about by God's Word. In John 1 we see the supreme coming of God's Word in Jesus Christ, his Word made flesh. And in Romans 10 where we read that faith and spiritual life come by the Word, it is again clear that God has always created his people by his Word." It's never been the other way around!

I can't exactly remember what happened through the remainder of our conversation, but this portion of it certainly helped to gel some of my own understanding of the absolute centrality of the Word. The understanding I speak of is not simply an abstract one of how God has worked but one that influences our priorities in ministry in practical ways.

Consider the promotional mail pastors receive. The advertisements assure us success in ministry if we buy a particular product. No matter whether it's audio equipment, music, curriculum, a conference, or parking consulting, investing our money will make all the difference between our ministry's succeeding or failing. Many people have an economic interest in making us feel guilty, inadequate, and unequipped. The way to avoid such a snare is by convincing ourselves of the priority and the sufficiency of the ministry of the Word and to stake our whole service on that.

Do you see how important this is for the glory of God and the good of his people? Why, in so many of our churches, is it *unusual* to see someone giving their all to follow Christ, and growing in him? Is it because we allowed people who are in open unrepentant sin to continue on in our congregation, and so have diluted the witness, the fellowship? Why have we so neglected church discipline? Is it because we've not followed biblical instructions on leadership in the congregation (which we need in order to successfully practice church discipline), and we've also neglected the Bible's clear teaching on church discipline itself? Why have we neglected discipline? Is it because we don't teach about what church *mem-*

bership entails? And why would that be? Because we haven't made it clear what it really means to be a Christian in the first place? And why would that be? Because we've misunderstood the gospel? How could that be? Because we have misunderstood the Bible? And why would that be the case? Because we've had pastors who—with the best of motives—have given themselves to everything in the world before giving themselves to the study and preaching of God's Word! We've spent more time reading our email than our Bible. We have defended the Bible's authority more than experienced its power in our own lives.

Ministers are servants and stewards of God's Word—that's the message we are to deliver. We are stewards of the church in caring for a congregation; we don't own the church. *Steward* is a great word for a minister, isn't it? We are God's employees; he is our boss, and we work ultimately for him. The main task he has given us is making known the secret things of God—the gospel of the crucified Messiah!

Above everything else, a steward is called to be faithful. Paul continues, "It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). Paul's statement was an implicit condemnation of any unfaithful teacher among the Corinthians. The apostle Peter stated that all Christians are stewards, but ministers especially must be trustworthy (1 Pet. 4:10). We teachers of God's Word will be held accountable to a stricter judgment (James 3:1). We are like bankers, entrusted with a great deposit, and so we ministers of the Word must be faithful in our work because of the great value of what has been committed to us. Reliability, not originality, must be our concern as we recount the gospel of Christ crucified.

If the Corinthians thought less of Paul because of his commitment to this message, if other people dismissed him, if Paul himself even began to stray from it—none of these had commissioned him, and so none of these had the authority to change the mes-

sage that had been entrusted to him. God alone was to determine what Paul did as a minister of his gospel.

Paul says here that “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Cor. 4:3–4). Paul is unaware of anything against himself, but he knows that he is not acquitted by his self-assessment. It is the Lord who judges him. Of course, Paul isn’t saying that self-examination is wrong; in fact, he calls for it later in this letter (9:24–27; cf. 2 Cor. 13:5), but our self-assessment—a clear conscience—simply isn’t the ultimate issue. The nature of our fallenness is such that we can have a clear conscience and still be wrong, which is why our conscience must be educated by the Word of God. Self-esteem can’t be the final arbiter of judgment because we esteem ourselves too highly! We are called to make provisional judgments (so Matt. 7:6)—as Paul is about to do forcefully in 1 Corinthians 5!—but no mere human is our ultimate judge because, as Paul says in 4:4, we will be judged by the Lord (cf. 2:10–16).

Do you see the freedom you have in knowing the identity of your ultimate judge—that there is only one and that he can be well-disposed toward you? The marvelous truth is that the One who knows us best is the One who loves us most. As Don Carson succinctly put it, “What matters most in God’s universe is what God thinks of us.”⁴

Assure yourself of God’s verdict through Christ, and you can have a more accurate regard for the judgments of others (see v. 3). If you fear the Lord, you can deal with your fear of man. But remember that you cannot please God if you live to please men. I often think of a letter written by the Scottish pastor John Brown, which contained words of fatherly advice to a young man he had

⁴D. A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 80.

trained for the pastorate and who had recently been ordained as the minister of a small congregation. Brown wrote:

I know the vanity of your heart, and that you will feel mortified that your congregation is very small, in comparison with those of your brethren around you; but assure yourself on the word of an old man, that when you come to give an account of them to the Lord Christ, at his judgment-seat, you will think you have had enough.⁵

Can you hear the echoes of the minister-as-steward in those words? Remember this also: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account” (Heb. 13:17).

A true minister of Christ, according to Paul, is one who lives to please Christ, the one and only coming judge. That’s the time for ultimate judgment, not now and not by these Corinthians. “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God” (1 Cor. 4:5; cf. 3:13). Perhaps the Corinthians were tempted to wrongly esteem teachers impressive by worldly standards or striking in external appearance and manner.

In Washington eloquent spokesmen are hired to speak on behalf of particular men and women whether or not they agree with the opinions they represent. But the confidence of the spokesmen lies in the greatness of their skills rather than in the truth of their message. In ancient Corinth eloquent orators were also prized, and they were celebrated, honored, and well paid. The regard for such speakers had crept into the church—men were hon-

⁵ James Hay and Henry Belfrage, *Memoirs of the Rev. Alexander Waugh* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Son, 1839), 64-65.

ored not for giving the message of the cross but for how well they presented themselves, regardless of their actual message.

But such skills must not be the basis of evaluation for a Christian minister! For that reason, it is incredibly inappropriate, according to Paul, to allow a worldly, comparative pride of one Christian teacher over another. If each is a true Christian teacher, then each has been commissioned by the same master with the same message for the same purpose—glorifying God by proclaiming his reign. Allowing partisanship, as the Corinthians were, was to lose sight of the value of this one message. They were distracted by various messengers and their particular gifts. When such distraction occurs, we don't have far to go until we are following a particular messenger rather than the Word of God.

Brother, do you think you will be the last pastor called by your church? Are you leading the congregation toward loyalty to you or to God's Word and Christ's gospel? We pastors must be very careful about the loyalties we cultivate in the temporary stewardships we hold.

Paul continues, "Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.' Then you will not take pride in one man over against another" (1 Cor. 4:6). Scholars are uncertain about the origin of this quotation beyond the fact that it seemed to be well known. Most likely it was a reference to the expression, "it is written," used in the New Testament to quote the Old Testament. So it seems that Paul is exhorting the Corinthians not to go beyond the text of Scripture, and in so doing, he encourages the Corinthians to be committed to the message and to cherish faithfulness in their preachers.

We should be careful to remember that, as ministers, we are to be esteemed as instruments pointing to Christ. We must be faithful to deliver this particular message. Paul and Apollos were not in competition, as Paul carefully explained to the Corinthians in the

opening chapters of this letter, because the gifts of God's ministers come directly from God: "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

These three questions have been some of the most important questions in the Bible down through the history of Christianity. From Augustine to Martin Luther, God has used this verse to affect people powerfully, humble them, and exalt himself. Let this question echo in your own soul for a little while: "What do you have that you did not receive?"

The last Sunday night of his life, John Knox reported that he was tempted by Satan to trust in himself and to rejoice or boast in himself, but, Knox said to his servant, "I repulsed him with this sentence: 'What do you have that you did not receive?'"⁶ Earlier in the letter Paul had written about boasting: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1:31).

What do we have to boast about more than the cross of Christ, by which God has satisfied his love and his justice, his mercy and his holiness, and displayed it to all the world as he saves all who trust in him? A real minister has the cross at the center of his message, and his delivery of this message is the center of his role as a minister.

The Second Mark of a Real Minister Is a Cross-centered Life

C. J. Mahaney addresses well the cross-centered life in a later chapter where he considers Paul's words on the subject to Timothy. But the cross is an integral part of Paul's instructions to the Corinthians too, and it involves discerning which teachers they should trust. Paul refers to the apostles as "like men condemned

⁶Thomas M'Crie, *The Life of John Knox* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1989), 338.

to die” (1 Cor. 4:9), and that was Paul’s experience. This true apostle led a Christ-like life in stark contrast to the Corinthians, who saw prosperity as the mark of a true teacher. In this section of his letter, Paul uses some very sharp, ironic questions to deflate their pride and to reorient them to the cross and what Christ himself had taught about the nature of discipleship.

The use of heavy irony and a number of sarcastic statements are not Paul’s normal manner of teaching. But such irony and occasional sarcasm are not always outside the bounds of appropriate communication. In fact, irony could be particularly useful in helping the Corinthians to see how the false apostles had confused them and how topsy-turvy their view of the Christian life had become. Paul launches in: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!” (1 Cor. 4:8). Paul is mocking the Corinthians’ prosperity. Some of it may have been real prosperity, some imagined. Either way, it’s clear that many in the Corinthian church were feeling confident and fulfilled in a worldly manner.

Yet regardless of how they felt, Paul calls them back to reality and the truth that they weren’t reigning. Perhaps the Corinthians had accepted a false notion of the Second Coming, which confused final glorification with spiritual life on this earth. But Paul points out that if this life is the final kingdom promised by God, then Christ’s apostles certainly have no place in it if they are condemned to die in public shame: “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men” (4:9).

Paul’s outlook on life and ministry was apparently a bit more humble than that of the Corinthians, which is revealed in his use of images from public processions and spectacles. In ancient military processions, the ones last in line were the prisoners, and of this

number the last in line was the lowest in rank and the most despised. The reason for this is clear; such parades were filthy—the animals left their mark, and those farthest back in the procession had more of the accumulated remains to wade through. That, says Paul, has been his experience of life on earth, which is very different from the “reigning” the believers at Corinth claimed to be doing. Ultimately, such processions led to Corinth’s theater, which seated eighteen thousand, and the most wretched of men—those last in line—were left for the last show, the last “spectacle” of the day. Paul uses this imagery in his letter to express how he feels.

How different is this life from what the Corinthians had been taught by imposter apostles! “We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!” (v. 10). Paul sarcastically contrasted himself with the Corinthians’ claims. Paul understood that he was foolish (in the world’s eyes), weak, and dishonored. But at least some of the Corinthians were fancying themselves to be wise, strong, and honored. They had cobbled together some illusions or replaced the cross as the center of the Christian life with something much more palatable. Matthew Henry thinks they were self-deceived: “Those do not commonly know themselves best who think best of themselves.”⁷

I wonder what you think of yourself. The Christian message of a crucified Christ calls us to a different goal than we would otherwise pursue in this life. We’re no longer concerned with what the world calls *wise*, those who made the decision to crucify Christ. We no longer live for what the world, which opposes God, calls *strength*. We’re not captivated by applause and honor from those who have rejected Jesus, “the wisdom from God” (1 Cor. 1:30). My pastor friend, if you’ve been living for worldly wisdom and worldly honor,

⁷ Matthew Henry’s *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 6: *Acts to Revelation*, 524.

aren't you beginning to notice how unsatisfying it is? There is a better way, and, strange as it may sound, Paul is setting it out here.

The true Christ was rejected and put to death on the cross. And it is only that Christ who actually saves us:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4–6)

If the One whom we follow was stricken, smitten, and afflicted, if he was pierced, crushed, punished, and wounded, then we can't be too surprised that some of that may happen to us in this world. The Christian ministry is not all attending conferences—let alone speaking at them! So we might expect such rejection to happen especially to Christ's ministers, not because we die to bear sin, but because in our lives, we live in a way this world rejects.

True ministers of Christ are happy to be despised, if, by their being despised, somehow the gospel is displayed. Our goal is to display the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul would later write to the Corinthians (quoting the Lord's response denying his request), "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

We know the bargain summarized by Jim Elliot: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Remember what Paul wrote: "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than

man's strength." (1 Cor. 1:25). True ministers of Christ and his cross have experienced this and are confident of it.

In his life Paul shared in the rejection of Christ: "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless" (1 Cor. 4:11). The verbs in verses 11–12 are in the present tense, which means that Paul knew hunger and thirst as a present experience, even during the writing of this epistle. He wasn't reaching out from a great cathedral or a cushy university lectureship. Paul comes across more like an evacuee here! But, of course, his hope wasn't meant to be anchored here in this world. He, like all real Christian ministers, had his hope stored elsewhere.

Paul continues, "We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly" (vv. 12–13). The apostles have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. Paul works with his hands (see Acts 18:3), preaches the gospel, experiences rejection from this world, and keeps on going even when his clothes are threadbare and his body exhausted. Remember, Paul worked as a tentmaker in Corinth (Acts 18:3). The worldly-wise, well-to-do citizens of Corinth would have been embarrassed to ask their friends to come and hear someone who earned a living by manual labor, someone such as Paul. But that didn't stop Paul from continuing on. Clearly he did not live for the approval of this world like the false ministers were doing.

When society cursed Paul, or persecuted and slandered him, they weren't taking from him anything he expected to keep in this world. Paul believed he had no right to well-wishes from God-haters and no ultimate right to freedom or a good name among those who rejected Christ. Yet he continued to respond to such opposition in the way Christ had demonstrated to his followers: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23; see also Matt. 5:10–12; Luke 6:28; 23:34).

Paul did not attempt to cover over opposing views of God and the world; he simply followed the one who said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58; cf. Phil. 3:10). Paul wrote to the Romans: “If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom. 8:17). Brother pastors, the only way to follow Jesus is to die daily to self-devotion.

A few questions now for senior pastors in particular: When was the last time you inconvenienced yourself in order to serve others? Do you use others to serve yourself or yourself to serve others? You realize, don’t you, that an over-concern for physical comfort can be an enemy of your soul? What have you found effective in undermining your concern for personal comfort—biographies, role models, accountability, or discipline? Have these tools produced visible fruit in your life and in the lives of others?

Prosperity isn’t always wrong, but prosperity is always dangerous. It can be disorienting to the Christian, perhaps especially to the minister. We must live lives that show there are things that are worth even more than this world’s prosperity. How can you do that in your circumstances this week?

Pray for me, that I would have a life that evidences the supremacy of Christ and his cross in my affections. Consider the biblical qualifications for eldership; do you aspire to reflect these qualifications? We want to live a life different from this world, a life that tells the truth, a life that gives hope in a dying world. Real ministers live cross-centered lives.

The Third Mark of a Real Minister Is Having Cross-centered Followers

In the middle of the next section of Paul’s letter (1 Cor. 4:14–21), Paul writes, “Therefore I urge you to imitate me” (v. 16). This is

Paul's way of urging the Corinthians (his spiritual children) to humble themselves as the apostles (and Christ!) have done and to stop following the foolish ways of their worldly teachers. Paul warns them about the false way at least some of them seem to be taking and urges them to follow his example instead.

Paul exhibited no pride in putting himself forward as a model. In fact, he demonstrated humility by inviting personal scrutiny into a life—his—that Paul knew was far from perfect. Paul was a sinner, of course, but in-so-far as he followed Christ, he presented his life as a light for others to follow. Surely a Christian minister should not only teach the gospel correctly and live a Christ-like life, but he should also lead others to do the same. Models are a basic tool from which we grow and learn—children in families, kids on a team, apprentices in trade, and new Christians in church. Example is part of pastoral ministry.

Yet for all the severity of his language, you can see that Paul really loves these Corinthians. He had lived with them for a year and a half. “I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children,” he wrote (v. 14). Brother elder, do you feel like that about the members of your congregation? Paul's phrasing makes clear that he was aware of coming across harshly. But he loves them with fatherly love, as he goes on to explain: “Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (v. 15).

Paul reminds them that he is their father in the gospel in a unique way. He was the church planter at Corinth, the founding father of that local congregation (see Acts 18). We have special regard, don't we, for those whom God used to lead us to Christ? Paul was using their regard—he was using anything he could—to dissuade these young believers from following imitation teachers and their counterfeit gospel, which is also why he urges them out-

right to imitate him⁸ He holds out his arms through this letter and appeals to them with the voice of a father for their trust to imitate him in living a cross-centered life.

Children naturally imitate their parents, but calling upon adults to a lifestyle of imitation certainly puts on pressure—hopefully of the right kind! Just like Paul, Christian preachers are models. There’s no way around it; modeling is part of our calling. Paul had been the example the Corinthians followed until other teachers came along with an initially attractive, alternative example.

Some time ago I had the privilege of dining with a fellow board member at the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Dr. C. Everett Koop. Dr. Koop was President Reagan’s surgeon general from 1981–1989. At one point, dinner conversation turned to good nutrition, and someone made a comment about Dr. Koop’s dinner order. He responded that in his role as surgeon general he was paid to be a teacher, not an example! Of course, he was joking, but there is no doubt that pastors should be examples. We serve Christ as ministers of his Word, which should be accompanied by a life that acts as a sounding board to ratify and verify our teaching and strongly push it out even farther.

Of course, we will never be faithful ministers if we only preach what we live perfectly; nevertheless, we should generally be examples to the flock God has committed to our care. We must be sure that not only are we prayed for, loved, obeyed, and supported, but also that our examples are followed. Writing as a preacher, and at least a little aware of my own sins, this is a harrowing responsibility. But it is an unavoidable part of the job. If I’m going to preach the Bible, I have to preach more than I can live, though I should always be trying to live, by God’s grace, so as to be an example of Christ’s power in my life and an encouragement to others.

⁸ Paul says similar things elsewhere. See, for example, 1 Cor. 11:1; Gal. 4:12; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9; cf. Heb. 13:7.

Reinforcing what he has just written, Paul adds, “For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church” (v. 17). Timothy would teach them how to live faithfully.

In light of his difficult circumstances, I’m sure it was hard for Paul to send away a close friend and co-laborer such as Timothy, so the fact that he did shows something of the depth of his love for them. Paul had an intense desire for the Corinthians to be taught the truth about Christ and see Christ-like teachers live out the faith before them, and for that reason he wouldn’t rest well until he knew that they better and more fully embodied the Christianity they professed.

That’s why he says what he does here at the end of chapter 1 about his upcoming visit, where he challenges the Corinthians to be ready to see him. Some of these believers had become arrogant, as Paul sharply points out (v. 18), so he is, in effect, ordering them to be humble! Did you realize that humility is your duty if you’re a follower of Christ, especially if you’ve been entrusted with any authority in the congregation? Humility encourages every other virtue, it undermines our sin, and it opens us up to hearing how we can continue to grow in Christ.

Consider the importance of authority, and how it is subjected to unending suspicion and critique these days. However, such critique is not unique to our postmodern, post-Enlightenment culture. Suspecting authority is the very heart of the fall. Satan essentially convinced our first parents that God could not tell us “no” and love us at the same time. The first sin was born when Eve accepted the lie that a denial of desire cannot flow from good, loving, and correct care.

A natural suspicion of authority is one reason that those of us who carry it in various spheres should exercise it carefully. Abuse of authority seems to validate the basic human decision to deny

God's fatherly role in our lives. It also gives the enemy another tool, another charge, another example. Authority is a wonderful, life-giving gift (see 2 Sam. 23:3–4), which can and must be used. But authority should only be used with sincere humility.

How could we ever imagine following Christ without continual growth in humility? Who could be more humble than Christ? How can we think to follow him in his self-giving love unless our self-concerns shrink while our concerns about God and others grow?

Consider how Paul finishes this section of his letter:

But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit? (1 Cor. 4:19–21)

Paul is clear that he will come and investigate the claims of the arrogant among them,⁹ and he says that when he comes, he will investigate not their words, but their power, because the kingdom of God is not about words but about power. God's rulership or reign isn't just an idea—it happens in people's lives. It is happening in the lives of many reading this chapter and in our congregations.

Paul is challenging the Corinthians to consider the results of false teachers. Is their teaching producing anything more than hot air or are people actually being saved through their message? In this last verse Paul warns that if they do not respond to his gentle love, he will come with a whip, by which, of course, he means not a literal whip, but a severe reproof. Both gentleness and severity are a part of Christian love, and especially of the love of the minister for his congregation.

⁹It's interesting that Paul says he will do this "if the Lord is willing." It's as if he had read James's letter (James 4:15). Even apostles are humbled when they consider the future!

Brothers, as Paul said elsewhere, our congregations are the proof of our ministry. We need congregations comprised of people whose lives reflect the truth of the gospel that we preach. One friend of mine particularly likes icons—images of the prophets, apostles, even Jesus Christ. He explains his devotion to icons by the same reasoning that Eastern Orthodox theologians have used for more than a thousand years—if we don't have images of Christ, they reason, that must be rooted in a flesh-denying Gnosticism, and we, in effect, are denying the incarnation.

I, for one, am not persuaded. Jesus didn't train his disciples in sketching or painting. The first image we have of Christ was written by a pagan mocking a Christian “worshipping his god”—and the little crude drawing has a simple figure with a donkey's head hanging on a cross. If we had a photograph of Jesus and the twelve disciples, I don't think we could tell which one was Jesus merely by his appearance. No glow; no halos. On the other hand, if that picture were to become a moving picture, then I think we could tell the identity of Christ very quickly by noticing which one gave himself in love to those around him. The sacrifice of love—that was the purpose of the incarnation, and that is the purpose of the church. God has left a witness for himself in you and in our congregations. Our physical natures are an aspect of our social natures, enabling our ability to interact with others in love and service.

Jesus said in John 13, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (vv. 34–35). God has forbidden statues to be made of him; Jesus had no icons of himself drawn and painted, but by his Spirit he fashions a representation of himself—and that is the church. In its holiness we see something of God's holiness; in its unity we see something of God's unity; in its love, we see something of God's love.

Looking back over 1 Corinthians 4, I'm struck by the great

combination of humility and confidence Paul displayed in his words and life, which make him a model for all of us. We should desire boldness for helping others grow in Christ. We ought to risk ourselves in order to be of service to others.

That's what Paul was challenging the Corinthians to look for, surrounded as they were by imposters: a cross-centered message, a cross-centered life, and cross-centered followers.

Conclusion

The most important issue for recovering churches is placing the Word at the center, and that happens most fundamentally through preaching. Now it's one thing to hear and cheer such talk at a conference, or to root for it in the privacy of our office while reading a book; it is another to live it out in our ministries. The congregations to which God has called us are of much greater importance than any conference or book. Ministers who write books and speak at conferences know that doing so falls outside of our normal work in ministry and calling, and that such ministries are not our most important charge. But serving in these venues enables us to exercise congregational stewardship.

By his last question, Paul was telling the Corinthians that how they prepared for his coming would determine the tone of the visit. The choice that stands before us is very much like the choice Paul gave to them. Your life will soon be intersected by God, whether through the Lord's return or your death. And how will that coming be for you? Will you find yourself prepared by the truth about the cross, or will you find yourself caught out, unprepared, living—even in your pastorate—as if this passing world were going to last forever?

My brother pastor, beware the siren call of those teachers who beckon you to put your heart—your all—into the priorities of this world. They are impostors; they are lying to you. The wolves don't come with business cards that say *wolf*. Jesus taught that

the wolves would dress up to look like sheep. They learn sheep language and use sheep expressions. They even publish books with sheep publishers, all so that you will think they're sheep. But be wise. Look at their message—what are they saying?

The great news is about another home, an immortal one, available to you. Its power streams back into this life, to which Paul's life and teaching gave witness. The cross is the center, but it's not the end. Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him. And we are called to be his followers. On through the cross of this world's rejection is the eternal acceptance of God. You can have no better goal than to be in a loving relationship forever with this great and glorious God and to lead others into the same. Our churches are to be living, loving, moving pictures of this great gospel. Preaching this gospel, leading a church to be such a display, is our real ministry.